

Red Sea Rescue

by Arthur Catherall

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140 pages in the print book edition

Bethlehem Books • Ignatius Press
10194 Garfield Street South
Bathgate, ND 58216
www.bethlehembooks.com

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1. No Light in the Lighthouse

THERE was no sign of an approaching sandstorm when Ibrahim and his sister Saa-la led their donkey Pasha across the narrow Causeway which linked Lighthouse Island with the Island of Kus. Their father, Abdul Hussein, who was the lighthouse keeper, watched them cross from a rock at the beginning of the Causeway. From that position he could see down into the amazingly clear water and, if the big shark which often came round on the chance of an easy meal drew near, Abdul would throw stones at him. That always scared the shark away.

The Causeway was coral, growing to within six inches of the surface. It was no more than four feet wide, and the only bridge connecting the two islands. Until the arrival of the shark two years earlier Abdul had never worried about his children walking over the Causeway, or swimming in the sea. Now he insisted on watching over them when they crossed, and returned to his look-out post when they were on their way back. Abdul's wife was dead and he took great care of fourteen-year-old Ibrahim and twelve-year-old Saa-la.

For the first hour on Kus Island the two youngsters searched the beaches. They found one big plank of wood and a broken deck-chair, and were trying to fit this together when they became aware of a sudden shadow between them and the sun.

"Oh, I thought we'd finished with sandstorms for this year," Saa-la protested as she looked up at the pale yellow cloud racing across the sea towards them. "We haven't had one for nearly two weeks."

"Father didn't think they'd finished," Ibrahim said. "Come on, let's find a sheltered spot."

By the time they had found a hollow and scooped sand out to make it deeper the sun had turned a dull red, then purple, and was finally hidden from sight. The great cloud of fine sand blowing across the Red Sea from the forty-mile-distant coast of Egypt blotting out the whole sky.

For more than six hours the wind screamed above them, forcing them to cover their faces. Little Pasha lay with his head pressed into the sand, his eyes shut and his nostrils closed until they were

little more than slits. All the time a fine rain of yellow dust was falling on them.

It was late afternoon when the wind suddenly stopped. It was almost as if someone had closed a door, and the silence afterwards would have been startling to anyone not used to living on an island in the Red Sea.

Pasha rose and began shaking himself. He blinked the sand from near his eyes and Ibrahim helped him after he had cleaned the dust from his own face.

"I'm thirsty," Saa-la said, running her fingers through her hair in an effort to get rid of the yellow dust.

"We have no more water," Ibrahim said, indicating the empty bottle. "Think of little Pasha, who hasn't had even a drop of water."

"Let's go home," Saa-la suggested. "We could come over tomorrow to collect what the sea will have brought."

"Go home! How can we? Listen to the waves," Ibrahim urged. "It will be at least an hour before the sea is calm enough to let us cross the Causeway."

"Oh yes." Saa-la looked crestfallen, and sighed as Ibrahim climbed out of the hollow where they had sheltered. The storm had laid a covering of fine yellow sand several inches deep over the whole island, and now the sea did not deserve its name of Red, for it was quite yellow in the brightening sunlight.

Away to the east the storm could be seen as an angry mass of cloud, racing towards the coast of Arabia. Over the unseen land of Egypt the sun was once more shining from a cloudless sky, but it was already beginning to sink downwards. In an hour the day would be over.

Leading the donkey to the nearby beach Ibrahim shaded his eyes to look across the dust-covered sea. The yellow was already being broken up, for the wind had whipped the water into waves a foot high. They would soon grow calm, but for the time being there was no hope of crossing the Causeway to Lighthouse Island.

After a few minutes both youngsters saw something about a hundred yards out to sea, and a strong current was bringing the queer-looking stuff nearer.

Soon both Ibrahim and Saa-la could see that what had looked like a small floating island was really a hotchpotch of things—

planks, cardboard boxes and several sacks. It could be a rich haul.

Within minutes a dozen seabirds appeared. They had been sheltering somewhere until the storm ended, and one of them had spotted the floating debris.

Soon the birds were standing on the things, and Ibrahim's eyes narrowed as it became apparent that they had found something good to eat. The birds were gulping down whatever it was, as if they had been starving for days.

"I've a good mind to swim out and see what it is," Ibrahim muttered.

"You mustn't, Ibrahim," Saa-la said sharply. "Remember the shark."

"He is probably on the other side of the islands," Ibrahim snapped back.

"Father says—" Saa-la began, and stopped, for even as she was speaking something happened where the seabirds were feeding. There was a sudden movement; two floating sacks were thrust apart, and a grey-blue snout poked up through the water.

With squawks and squeals the seabirds took flight. Wings beating frantically they tried to get into the air, but two of them were unlucky. The great jaws of the shark closed and the seabirds were engulfed.

Ibrahim scowled. Saa-la, her eyes wide, turned and looked at her brother. She did not say "I told you so", but Ibrahim knew what she was thinking, for he grinned and with a shrug admitted: "You were right, Saa-la—for once."

"For once!" Saa-la pouted.

"Very well, you are right *again*," Ibrahim agreed, laughing. "Anyway, the shark has done us a good turn. The seabirds won't come back for a few minutes, and he has divided the things, and they are coming inshore quicker now."

The shark's upward thrust into the middle of the floating mass had split it, and some of it was now moving in towards the beach. One sack and a big cardboard box were ahead of the rest, and both children squatted on the sand, watching patiently.

Saa-la broke the silence. Realizing the light was beginning to change, she looked up and saw that only half the sun was visible. The rest had dropped below the horizon. Laying a hand on Ibra-

him's right arm she said earnestly: "Ibrahim, we should go home! See, the sun is setting and if we don't go now it will be dark before we cross the Causeway."

"Go now, and leave these?" Ibrahim was shocked at the idea. "You know what the currents are like here. The stuff will float almost into the shallows, then the current will carry them away again. If we don't get them now . . . we'll never get them."

"But the sun . . ." Saa-la protested, and even as she was speaking the deep red half-sun seemed to be dropping quicker and quicker.

Ibrahim looked up, and frowned. He knew they ought to go, but the thought of not getting the prizes which were so close made him jump to his feet. "I'll go in for them," he said. "The shark won't come into the shallows."

"No!" Saa-la protested. "You know very well the water is only shallow for a little way out."

"Oh, you . . ." Ibrahim growled, but he sat down again.

The sun set, the red light of evening turned a deeper hue. The sea seemed to change color from red to purple, and then as that began to deepen into the blue-black of night, Ibrahim waded in and dragged ashore the sack and the cardboard box.

"We haven't time to look," Saa-la insisted. "Pasha! Come here." And, as the donkey obediently trotted to her, she lifted the cardboard carton and put it on Pasha's back. She had to hold it there, for it was too bulky to balance without help.

Her brother picked up the sack, grunting under its weight, and Pasha gave a little *haaaw* of protest as the sack was slung across his thin shoulders. Then he began to walk, as if he knew they had no business being on Kus Island after sunset.

In the seven minutes it took the little party to reach the Causeway the light dimmed even more. Overhead the first stars were showing like pale pinpricks in the deepening blue of the sky.

The white-painted lighthouse was just visible, and Ibrahim went over to where a stout wooden post had been driven into the sand. Hanging from it by a cord was a brass case. Once it had been the case of an anti-aircraft shell, fired by some gunner during the last big war. It had been washed up on the beach, and Abdul Hussein had hung it by a cord, with a small iron bar alongside. It made a splendid alarm bell.

Ibrahim held the shell case up by the cord, then struck it several times with the iron bar. *Dongggggg—dongggg—dongggg—dongggg-gg-gg!* The brass case gave off a high-pitched musical note, and the last note seemed to vibrate the air for ten seconds or more after Ibrahim ceased striking.

Already the sea was calming down, and the bell-like notes sounded clear above the murmur of breaking waves.

Ibrahim and Saa-la stood staring towards the lighthouse. During the day the windows in the white-painted building looked like strange black eyes. At night they blended with the rest of the building and were unseen. Now the whole building was completely dark. It was the first time either of the youngsters had seen it like this.

“They must have been busy all day,” Ibrahim said. “They are always busy when there is to be a visit by the lighthouse inspector. Everything must be spotless for when he arrives.”

Saa-la said nothing, but there was a deepening frown of worry on her face as the lighthouse remained unlit. It was growing rapidly darker, so that now it was almost impossible to see the shape of the tower. After waiting a few more minutes Saa-la said: “Ring the bell again, Ibrahim.”

Dong-dong-dong-dong-donggggggggggg! Ibrahim beat the brass case with a sudden flurry of blows. It was like the call of a very impatient person demanding immediate attention.

“That should bring him,” he said confidently, but a minute or so later he beat the “bell” again, for the lighthouse still remained dark, and was now blending with the rest of the island so completely that it was hard to see.

“The light should be lit now, Ibrahim,” Saa-la pointed out, growing uneasiness in her voice. “Something has happened. I’m sure it has.”

“What could have happened?” Ibrahim demanded, and his own uneasiness made his voice sharp. “The only thing I can think of is that maybe Hassan is ill. After all he is very old. He’s over sixty. He told me that himself—so he could be ill. But if he is, and Father is looking after him—he’ll light the lamp any minute now, and a minute makes no difference, does it?”

“You should know better than that.” Saa-la was as impatient as her brother. “You say you are going to be a lighthouse keeper—so you should know that ships going along the Red Sea expect to see

our light from sunset to sunrise. How do they know where they are if the light remains unlit?"

"Aaaaah!" Ibrahim knew Saa-la was right, and he vented his exasperation on the bell once more, making the air quiver with the shrill, high-pitched notes. As they stood watching there was a sudden swirl of water alongside the Causeway, and for several seconds they could see a long, torpedo-shaped body a foot below the surface. It was lit by the pastel shades of phosphorescent light—pale blues, pinks and yellows. That queer but beautiful light which is seen in warm waters where there are lots of fish.

Neither Ibrahim nor his sister noticed the loveliness of the colors. They saw only the long, powerful body of "their" shark. The deadly watcher who patrolled the Causeway and the beaches of Lighthouse Island, in the hope that one day something big would fall into the sea.

"How are we going to cross, if Father doesn't come with his lamp?" Saa-la asked, fear in her voice. "Ibrahim, I'm frightened."

"There isn't anything to be frightened of," Ibrahim said, trying to reassure her. "Even if Father and Hassan are too busy to come down with a light, well, it won't be long before Gran comes to look for us."

"I'm thirsty!"

"Saa-la, I am thirsty! Pasha must be even thirstier," Ibrahim pointed out. "But if—what's that?"

On the night air came a distant roaring. It made both the youngsters turn their heads nervously in the direction of the sound. Then Ibrahim gave a sheepish laugh, ashamed that he had been startled. "It's only a ship. It—oh!"

"What's the matter?" Saa-la was not even trying to hide her nervousness now.

"The ship!" Ibrahim paused to swallow a sudden lump which had come into his throat. "There is no light. That ship is signaling. Perhaps the captain is asking where the light is. You know how dangerous these islands and the coral reefs are. Saa-la, something *is* wrong. What are we going to do? There is no light, and a ship is coming."

Saa-la was almost in tears. Both children had been born on Lighthouse Island. They knew all about ships, for day and night vessels were passing up and down the Red Sea. Their lighthouse, on the shipping route, was of greatest importance. Vessels had to